

The Clipper Visits... Rebecca Parris

By MARTHA HIMES

"My sisters tell a story about waiting for the bus to go to church on Sunday. My eldest sister was dressed in her pillbox and her gloves, standing on one street corner, because she didn't want to be associated with me. I was swinging off the lamppost, wearing 89 colors, wild and crazy, doing plays in the middle of the sidewalk.

"I was my own person at a very early age, I guess," Rebecca Parris said.

That free spirit that Parris demonstrated in childhood has led to her becoming one of New England's most



Duxbury's Rebecca Parris is one of New England's most acclaimed jazz vocalists.

acclaimed jazz vocalists. Since she began singing jazz in the early 1980's, she has recorded 10 albums and has

won 10 Boston Music Awards.

Now residing in her parents' former home in Duxbury, Parris was raised in Newton. Her parents, Ned and Shirley McCloskey, brought their children to the South Shore every summer.

She began performing professionally as a child, doing summer stock at her family's theaters in Kingston and Duxbury. She took singing lessons from her uncle Blair McClosky of Duxbury, who hoped she would become an opera singer.

"I didn't want the opera career. I wasn't that serious a kid. You have to be very serious minded, you have to be in the practice mode all the time, learn 8 languages. It's a very high-brow education. I was too much of a show person. I would have been perfect in the vaudeville era, because I had no qualms about going out there and looking like an idiot," Parris said.

Instead, after briefly attending the Boston Conservatory, she sang pop music with a series of bands. When her band switched to hard rock, a la Pat Benatar or Heart, in the early 1980s, Parris quit and switched to jazz.

The former pop singer immediately loved the theatricality, musicality and spontaneity of jazz. "A lot of what I do on my gigs is experiment.... I'll work out a new tune on a bandstand," she said.

Holly Stevenson, a Duxbury jazz musician, introduced the newcomer to local music teacher Stan Ellis, who became Parris's songwriting partner. The two created a demo album. During interviews with Boston area jazz DJs, they played tracks off the album and asked the audience to call if they thought Parris and Ellis should print it.

"The phones rang off the hook," Parris said.

The album was released as 1984's "A Passionate Fling."

Since then, Parris's career has been building steadily, both locally and nationally, with constant touring, performing and regular album releases. Her newest album is "Rebecca Parris: The Secret of Christmas," released in late 2002.

Parris teaches in Duxbury, as well as offering seminars all over the country. She feels her personal strengths are teaching and performing.

On the other hand, the singer's weaknesses are cigarettes and food. Diagnosed as diabetic two years ago, she consults a nutritionist for her diet and plans to quit smoking soon.

"I'm an earth mother. I can take care of everybody else but myself," she said.

Parris moved into her home six years ago. She lives there with her partner, Paul McWilliams, who is a pianist, and her daughter, Marla Kleman, whom Parris adopted shortly after moving in, in the third adult adoption in Plymouth County history.

Introduced by Sarah Vaughn's drummer, Kleman, a systems analyst, and Parris immediately became friends.

Soon, Kleman was spending weekends in Duxbury with Parris and McWilliams, and when they moved into their house, they invited Kleman to join them as part of the family.

"It's been a great thing for both of us. I have dogs instead of kids. It wasn't a lifestyle I wanted to bring a baby into certainly, me traveling, me singing...and Marla needed some guidance and some family, and now she has family, which is really important," Parris said.

Married briefly in the 1980s, Parris does not feel the need to marry again. She and McWilliams have lived together for 18 years.

Although she describes herself as shy, she is far from reticent. Politically, she lives to the left of center, and opposes a war against Iraq.

Parris rails against recent changes in the jazz industry, which she feels has begun to place more importance on packaging than performing. The singer refuses to mold herself into the frequently-seen model of emaciated youthfulness.

"For new artists, it's really no longer whether you're extremely talented. If you're homely and extremely talented, then you might as well teach," she said.

She also worries that decreased school budgets for music and arts will cause few children to receive lessons, limiting their growth as well-rounded people.

"We're turning out robots instead of humans with souls," she said.

Putting her music where her mouth is, Parris performs for a number of charitable causes, using her talent to raise money to benefit the homeless, AIDS research and abused women. In March, she'll be performing The Vagina Monologues to benefit the Women's Crisis Center in Haverhill.

For 2003, her goals are to release another album and obtain new management and a new agent.

"It's time for changes," Parris said.

When not on stage, Parris watches a lot of science fiction television, tends her

many houseplants and plays with her two spoiled and much-loved small Maltese dogs, Eubie (named after Eubie Blake) and Louis (named after Louis Armstrong).

But she never, ever listens to music. "It's a busman's holiday," she said.

